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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: UPDATED DEMOCRATIC REFORM STATEGY

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Classified By: DCM William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

Introduction

¶1. (C) Lebanon's democratic traditions go back at least to its initial elections, first held during the Ottoman rule Empire in 1854. The landmarks in Lebanon's democratic history are the 1924 Constitution, the National Pact of 1940, and the 1989 Ta,if Accord. Throughout Lebanon's history democratic initiatives have been challenged. Today, democracy is again being tested during the current presidential election season. Parliament must elect the president and is supposed to do so by November 24. What is at stake in this election are two competing visions: one envisioning a free, independent, and sovereign country; the other a Lebanon under the de facto hegemony of Syria. The March 14 majority, whom we support, feels under severe threat, with Members of Parliament (MPs) taking extraordinary security precautions in the aftermath of the September 19 assassination of one of their colleagues, Antoine Ghanem. Presidential politics color everything in Lebanon right now.

¶2. (C) Beyond the current elections, Lebanon faces a number of long-term challenges which affect its ability to move forward on various democratic issues. Among these are the still strong remains of a post-feudal social and political structure, an economy suffering the effects of the 2006 war with Israel and lack of political stability, weak governmental institutions, the political and military strength of Hezbollah, the residual influence of the former Syrian occupiers, and the absence of a national consensus on what type of democracy Lebanon should embrace. Optimism was high in early 2005 when the Syrians withdrew from Lebanon. Unfortunately, the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri in 2005, war with Israel in 2006, and the current pro-Syrian boycott of government has shaken the confidence of many citizens.

¶3. (C) Despite these challenges, there are a number of positive factors which make Lebanon an ideal location for USG democracy-building activity. Lebanese society is highly educated with a vibrant press. Although many young people have emigrated to build secure futures, they would prefer to stay in Lebanon if conditions became more favorable. Finally, we have seen civil society, supported by international donors; begin to take hold over the last few years. Certainly, a great deal of work remains, but democratic foundations are being laid.

¶4. (C) Embassy Beirut continues to assist the Government of Lebanon (GOL) in implementing its reform agenda which will enable diverse members of society to have their needs met by a stable and constitutionally formed government. Three key

components of our work include:

- a new electoral law;
- competent, effective, and transparent government institutions; and
- an independent judiciary.

New Electoral Law

¶15. (C) Our overall all goal is to help Lebanon hold free and fair elections which reflect the independent will of the people. The current political stalemate resulting from the opposition's November 2006 withdrawal from the Cabinet and the action by the parliament Speaker, part of the opposition, to keep the Parliament from meeeting has greatly hampered efforts to reform the current electoral law. In 2008-2009, post hopes to work closely with the newly elected President, Prime Minister, Parliament and civil society to enact this important reform in time for the next parliamentary elections in spring 2009.

Competent Effective, and Transparent Government Institutions

¶16. (C) The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) and Public Diplomacy (PD) funds are coordinated at Post to strengthen Lebanese sovereignty by bolstering the democratic governing institutions and improving transparency and accountability. More resilient and effective institutions will repel Syrian

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influence and decrease Hizballah's authority and influence. Post also plans to improve Lebanese citizens' ability to participate in decision-making processes. While current political events have hampered our ability to work with certain national institutions, Post has placed a renewed focus on finding opportunities to strengthen municipal governments throughout Lebanon.

¶17. (C) The Lebanese constitution mandates that certain government institutions be led by persons from specific groups. For example, the president should be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of the Parlimanet a Shia Muslim. However, demographic changes have occurred over time and the strict focus on confessional make-up has led to many on the current problems plaguing Lebanese government institutions. MEPI, DRL, and PD funded initiatives offer support to civil society organizations that promote enhancing cross-confessional proposals throughout Lebanese society and within government institutions. In the coming two years, Post plans on supporting cross-confessional civil society groups, including non-extremist Shia and Sunni groups throughout Lebanon. Post will also work to improve the professionalism of various government employees and support the idea that employees should be hired based on merit, not confessional ties or personal connections.

Independent Judiciary

¶18. (C) After decades of Syrian control, the Lebanese judiciary has not improved over the last two years and remains in disrepute. With USG technical support, laws are drafted according to international standards and more judicial officials have been trained by U.S. professionals and other professionals from donor countries. Problems remain, however; for example, money and influence still derail the Lebanese judicial process; judicial decisions are not transparent; and, the appeals system fails to address the

public's needs. Lebanese citizens lack faith in their own court system. USAID, MEPI, DRL, and PD funded initiatives will focus on improving these conditions. This likely is a long-term project which will need continued financial support from the USG.

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